

FIELD



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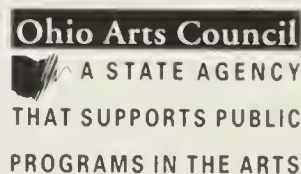
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BACH

Six days a week my father sold shoes
to support us through depression and war,
nursed my mother through years of Parkinson's,
loved nominal cigars, manhattans, long jokes,
never kissed me — always shook my hand.

Once he came to see me when a Brandenburg
was on the stereo. He listened with care —
the brisk melodies, symmetry, civility, passion.
When it finished, he asked to hear it again,
moved his right hand in time, would have
risen to dance if he had known how.

"Beautiful," he said when it finished,
my father, who'd never heard a Brandenburg,
eighty years old, bent and scuffed all over;
just in time he said, "That's beautiful."

BECAUSE I AM HEIR TO MANY THINGS,

warmth of dandelion, shamble of bear,
caution of inchworm, brain of flicker,
I was not surprised, when ankle deep
in drifts among the February woods,
I felt suddenly aroused by a sound
like a wooden spoon rattling a bucket.

It was just another brother, a grouse,
like an old man dreaming he is young again,
confused and drumming on a hollow log,
wishing for love in a preposterous season.

FLOOD

Here is the city of desire, city without roofs,
city of mourning doves, of moon-colored tulips,
of rain on cement, rain drumming
on sewer covers, city of always, of the sudden
amplitude. The question on today's exam
is "The terrible doubt is also a terrible hope."
We write our answers in chalk on the black
and silver roads. We write our names

on the city walls: Melinda, Luisa, Porsche.
Etc. There is room enough.
The wind tugs at our shirt hems, it fills
our umbrellas, pulls us around like smoke.
My nails are soft, watery, and I can see
through my skin, I can see through it

what Augustine called *the mass and weight
of misery*. It is stone and flesh,
it is the part of us which bears witness
to the fog threading the mountains,
and which notes well, below it, the pale lines left

on the rock from so many floods.
The water stood there and there and there.

Habit is the fear of impermanence.
I raise my arms to show how far under I am:
the dark sky marked by thin, white clouds.
The geese climbing.

DOLL HOUSE

I thought growing up meant I could live there.
I could choose: the attic murmuring its tiny threats
above me, the children, the smooth floors.
I set a backdrop of elms and mountains behind it, a garden
circling a stone birdbath and its own crooked dragonfly.

Oh, little Eden! In this life I keep arriving in the same place,
a street of six-flats, of yellow grass
breaking on the sidewalks, the sky March-colored,
a gray eggshell and the light a long way inside it,
inside another shell. Each moment is a house not

of my making, an idea I have to learn to inhabit.
That's me, twisting the miniature bathroom faucets
until they finally catch, brushing the infinitesimal
crumbs from the bed. I could lie here for hours, considering
the bat under the gutter. Can the bat hear the moon?

Can it hear me? Some nights, from my window,
a range of low clouds will disguise themselves as mountains.
It doesn't last. The world reverts to seeming less
than what it is, as if the unimaginable distances
of my life could be divided into the smallest increments.

As if it all adds up. I'm not hiding so much as wanting
to be found. There is a sound for this, a sound like listening.
I try to listen. I shut my hands over my ears.
Static. Little waves of leaf-echo, moth.

LIKE BEGETTING

In the storm, the cloud that looked
like a sleeve skimming the lake
falls into the water, and the water
darkens, swallowing all the gray sand.
So it is with me. One thing leads
to another, and the natural world
seems to say that the wages of sin
is disappearance — awful because it's hard
to imagine the magnitude of nothing.
In the kitchen, if I stare at the diced onions
left on the cutting board long enough
I see March snow — white with a tinge of grass
showing through — then hills, then sheep,
then the song I am humming now
which is monotonous and green.
Ten miles west, there are towns
without roofs or power, but here the hail
strikes the windows faintly, not at all
as if it wants to get in. It reminds me
of my own incongruous longings.
It reminds me of the story so simple
no one notices it ends. I open the front door
to the smell of wet mint and dandelions
and in the darkness of the maple the crows
holding council, talking about what a good funeral
it was, and how everyone came. Parts of the yard
are in shadow. Parts are bright with rain.

PROGRESS

I was there once. It was nightfall
when I crossed the bridge
over the river, and the river
gave off the smell of old stone

which is the smell of our gods,
of their worn faces in the museum's
small light. The sound they make!
It is the sound of the perpetual

sacrifice, of the mind trying
to be quiet. Even now something
is breathing in the disarray
of the peonies, and there —

in the plot where last month
the tulips stood like bright doors
to somewhere else. The yellow
and silver grass turns in the wind,

in the thickness and glitter of bees,
and the glasses left on the steps
during last night's party —
which is ongoing — sing

when the screen door shuts.
Yes, I am still here, sweeping
up the pale hair caught
in the floorboards under

the shadow of the maple.
But I am also remembering:
whole villages marched into the sea
and the green waves came in

to greet us. And I noticed,
in a clump of weeds
at the shoreline, a doll's head
marking our progress.

No, it is something smaller:
her black eyes burning.
It is difficult to imagine
another world.

BESIDE THE SEA

Some reefs bear precious names
the sea submits to the moon
the fisherman returns on foot
from the low tides
bearer of green crabs
in a dead-willow basket
when suddenly a girl cries out
leave me to my sorrows.

TIME OF THE ATOM

In the time of the atom
blue flies drone
over the crater of the wild rose
someone goes out to hand-sow
buckwheat again
sexual urges
cross bare rooms
natural curls
fall against a graceful body.

SLEEP

A book slips from his hands
when the farmer falls asleep
beneath vast sheets
in his dream, some women,
jealous,
wearing low-cut dresses,
wrestle for their happiness
in the middle of a garden
where on a pool's surface
an image quivers, a wall
and breasts lifted by breath
that seems measured on the scale
of silent beauty.

translated by Elizabeth Antalek

ST. MAGDALEN'S DAY

Green rustlings, more-than-regal disregard
Riffles the stiff, clean leaves of the laurel
Like cards — impatient under the glint and glower
Of moonlight and shifting cloudbanks.

The rain when it breaks breaks eight miles off:
Lightning faint at that distance like flashbulbs
— Blue-white — at a stranger's wedding. Passed over,
Untouched like Pharoah's daughters, like a fieldmouse

Under the owl's shadow, the great horned owl —
Silent, sated, sparing you out of indifference.

THE FEAST OF THE ASSUMPTION

The worn velveteen of the stag-horn
sumac reddens and sours at the path's end;
evening flares and smoulders like a pine-knot torch:

Over the water or the east marsh
the bassline, its melody lost,
of some simple rock song thrums and thrums —

neighborhood kids in an open garage.
The imaged sky — moon woozy in a white fog,
stars arrayed to a moral purpose —

unfolds like a hinged triptych, a spectacle,
a huge drive-in movie screen lit up
before a distracted crowd. The marsh

beyond the sumac-guarded way to the farther
dunes bristles with reeds, tall and broken.
A mother's voice: *Mary-Kate. . .Mary-Katherine, home!*

THE SPACE BETWEEN

1.

There is the density of the crowd.

It doesn't matter which way the tourists are told
to go: inside them you become them.
The answer is: we don't know which horror is correct.
The moment has begun as a spring.

The people are leaning in.

In my mind, Barcelona is a row of green trees, a funnel
to the labyrinth, leading down to the sea.
A man worries over a woman drinking alone, over a woman
anxious to finally be alone.

It's Sunday and the church is packed.

I met one to escape the other. Mainly, we remember
the flame, the arms thick
with pointing. Restricted to the surface the architecture
is passing us by.

The leaves are red, are green, are gone.

In the dream I locked my jaw. It is real, though: everything
has been enlarged. The burning. Mass
has eliminated the part of worry that can be touched. The man
sits close to catch the woman's eye.

Mainly, we don't forget the flame: its quelling.

2.

There is the density of destruction.

The building in Barcelona was burning. I remember the day
only in pictures. There is a certain horror: now
people are descending. In Vienna, there is a grocery store under
the ground, there is the opera only meters away.

The preacher's words keep moving.

The water was like whips, but compared to the flame: silent.
The women buying *semmel* will later go to the opera.
The man who designed the opera took his life, because it wasn't grand
enough. The arms are still pointing and thick.

The leaves are red, are green, are gone.

The situation presents itself: to know each other deeper. The day
that disappeared at the sea goes on, louder
than the dream. There is impossibility in this, if voiding
means burning. If time could be straight.

It's Sunday and the church is packed.

The Viennese women wear dresses made to deeply touch skin. The
opera
is over. They walk home watching themselves in darkened
shop windows, answering questions pondered by the silent city.
The mind
leaves itself on the street. The horror. We wouldn't waste it.

We watched the building burn into the ground.

3.

There is the density of the house next door.

Describing this may be more difficult. Down our dining room table,
like a stripe, in odd-shaped vases,
there is a row of tiny spring flowers. If this is an experiment,
I like this. Am left with it. Need it.

The people keep leaning in.

I dream of summer feet on hard wood floors. Next door, figures
cluttered on the mantle, shoes muck the back hall
closet. The man buys the woman a book to watch a woman writing.
There is some need. The burning horror of a dream.

It's Sunday and the church is packed.

We have forgotten the expectations, the hollow sound we moved to
as children. The shards are crossing,
like frantic spotlights. The memory was such that no one
could write it down: our senses got lost there.

The leaves are red, are green, are gone.

Remember the building was burning. No, houses are burning,
too. Here, I mean.
You still don't understand? The old Hungarian woman
has a part
of the city step, hanging making an L with her cane. She is still
hanging. The burnt hole
in the roof of the first house brings us the abundance of
the next.

The next day brought us the first pile of shreds.

MAKING IT UP AS I GO ALONG

That's the wrong waist I tell her in dance class.
Where hands are unhinged like bad grammar,

color jumps out at me. The random yes
or no of everything. Morality swirls

its poodle skirt. Clouds outside the window
are attracted by their sameness and use night

to cover it up. Try mine. These heels
are killing me. The rose tattoo at her ankle

has no point, is a story without an
ending. My husband's rasping in the corner

sounds like crickets on a summer afternoon.
The less he knows the better. And I want to

tell her something about shoes, about the nature
of things until they make sense. My kind

of sense. But instead I say whatever appears in
my head like *clouds are lurching toward*

the river with their two-step, the body is
just water running through our fingers,

where did you get that rose? And I'm
thinking that what is wrong has already happened.

A MOUTHFUL OF BOAT

True believers take time on its own terms,
water pirouettes, the stars' whereabouts
charted, the paperweight moon is

cumbersome. They want each other so much
it takes their breath away. The fleshy
sun above, angelic fish below,

a paroxysm of colors. They tell themselves
adjectives about dreams frenzied with
blood, about the start of a new century.

It's their place to be forgotten like
bumblebees and seasons or the occasional
naked tree. For the boat bones are mad

and eat fish. What can they do?
It's just the beginning. Birds rummage
in the air, toes of the ship

stain the water. They love what
they do not have yet: land,
how their beautiful selves speak,
trees waving like all the little gods.

SETTLING

The laws of physics are elegiac,
crawling between lanky clouds,

explaining sky at the drop of a hat. But
I am not as easily swept away. Watching

fruit caress its bowl, apples fall with
their first question about gravity. I think

about suggestion, the subtlety of protons
and neutrons arranged in an onyx vase

full of wildflowers by your hospital bed.
Your hand reaches out, settles like a fish

at the edge of a pond. I miss motion, energy,
imagining a waiter balancing plates at a restaurant

in another part of this city. White, whiter.
The roses I bring are snowy, unfair. They

haven't known the length of your life, met
your work, studied the twists and turns of conversation.

What we talk about now is light lassoed
around the earth, a moth with tattered wings circling

a dark stain. I learned how heavenly bodies gesture
to one another about coincidence, about luck.

The moon whispers places to go, the sky
falling, your white bed studded with stars.

My roses drink the hospital water and you say
you don't need to know more than that.

AT THE CHINESE MUSEUM, LOCKE, CALIFORNIA

Of all the changes of language a traveler in distant lands must face, none equals that which awaits him in Hypatia, because the change regards not words but things.

— Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

A dead woman's trousseau. A baby's linen shoe.
Racks of rice bowls and ladles, tin pots, brass bells.
A bachelor's opium pipe, a gambler's nicked tiles.
Nobody's things, belonging to nobody now.
A girl's red quilted jacket, item 39,
mildewing on the aluminum hanger. Her letters home.
Sheet music from Canton, songs about snow.
The news from Sacramento, 1902, photographs
of field laborers and drowned brides.
Cook and Auntie in starched white jackets
caught between baskets of strawberries and asparagus.
Riverboats unloading corn meal, cotton, the bright clot
of blood in the water. The stench of cattle
and bodies from the lower deck.
The smell of sick in the canal.

Slow inland river, you sweet rot
of oranges, camelias, soil, shit
and Al the Wop's Special,
your river gods go for eighty bucks a pop,
a pair of faux coolie pajamas, permanent press,
with I-Ching coin buttons and snap fly — for somewhat less.

At the Chinese School, in the bad light,
two pages of a primer, creased as goatskin
and blue with mold, translate signs into cursive.
The change regards not words but things
and not proper names but nouns
that neither wound nor shame you:

money, waiter, fork, spoon.

Diction of the restaurant.

The children have disappeared.

The invisible uncles keep still.

They'll have nothing to do with you.

EIGHT PIECES FOR GERTRUDE STEIN

there is no there there
in Oakland California
plums there are plums there

bees's bottoms fruit flies
when Ida comes then she comes
there where the plums lie

to be honey soon
sweetness splits where Ida sits
where Ida spoons

honey for baby
honey for bees and being
is enough maybe

mere being in time
no there there only this now
this glisten this shine

and listen Ida
six there are six senses
in this aria

cuckoo bird sings it
plum tree brings it stumbling down
ripe ripe ripe with it

light-riven girlspun
plum tree summer Ida me
Ida me Ida

BIG QUIET SPACE IN THE BED FOR
ALMOST AN HOUR AFTER MIDNIGHT

The lover and I are lying squarely
on the queen-size bed. The covers are
not warm. We are not alone. The dog
has no pupils, he's all iris, prince, and pant,
his great grin dividing. What stands
between us? He's got that wild-eye look —
the rubber teeth showing. Like a mad red
thought, he will not get off the bed. And
we will not, either. Because we are talking.
Digging in our heels. The mattress
pushes my back like a terrible idea. I
feel like I am standing
up in the dead center of my life. Hello,
dog, uncalm. No, this is not relaxing
at all, is it. He will not look me in
the eye. You hate this, don't you, dog.
Discussion is no god you'd consider useful,
wise. Would it be bad to read the *Atlantic* article
on chaos now? I wonder, breathing.
The dog is like a boy balanced
on my stomach, tense paw on my heart.
A little spray from his mouth with each pant.
He's a brown box on my chest, with a rough tongue.
Please don't say like a car. The lover over
there is hard thoughts in a nightshirt, a separate
pant. No one with the gift of speech. In this bed
tonight, breath a soaking rain.

A DARK RAIN

One more sleepless night. The newest translation
of Dante doesn't get me snoring. No Z's.
English, you love your letters: the ABCs,
T-shirts, the F-word, the N-word, V for

victory. Bananarama's "Cruel Summer"
vibrates in my brain stem, guest with tambourine.
It's a weekend to remember one's dead;
the nation's ghosts are thrown wreaths of roses

as if lifesavers. A neighbor laughs — the frat boy
and not the retired soldier with oxygen mask.
It's good that youth exists. It's bad that it's not
mine. Y is that? A for apple. I'm tired of

counting the suicides of Russian poets
in this era, in this ear. Better to sit
in my underwear next to a drunk lover
looking at constellations on the white ceiling.

Transformation is a talent; for example:
the letter h is letters l and n mating.
Summer's first storm is here, a slow darkness.
Thunder climbs down awkwardly from some distant

rage. Lightning takes off its stovepipe hat before
entering this emptying room. I'm packing
for a new life in a new city. B is
for boy, buoy. One more bandage for a wound

that is my life. Three of the boxes are
manuscripts I'm to judge before June 15.
Most titles are plain: *Bisexuality*,
Wheel, Doors, Poems from the Twentieth Century.

Ouch. Several of them have cranes: *The Last Crane of Midnight, The Crane's Lover, Cranes for a Far God*.
Wait! Lovers whisper under my front yard tree,
a green umbrella I cannot take with me.

It's so dark now that I can't see the M in
either of my palms: M for *muerte*, the death
begun at birth. I love how humans hum with
energy so I'm troubled by Dante fainting

throughout purgatory. Poor Virgil,
a one-man ambulance, always having to
pretend astonishment at Dante's foolishness.
That bolt just bit something north of here,

Thor's backyard! A heavy rain now, the tears of
the cosmos as cargo. When it rains after
midnight, the world shines like a wet kiss. Thank God
I put on a new roof which I've enjoyed one year.

I say goodbye to that debt. Someone's car alarm
feels threatened by the flood and so it's singing
in the fat dark. It's being turned off by a naked
neighbor. Books to pack, some to sell to

Twice-Loved Books on Market Street, but not Dante's
picnic in the pianissimo. New gutters
will prevent this Niagara Falls by my window.
The marijuana smokers on the third floor nest

across the street are awake so I pull down
the shades so they can continue to believe
they are alone. Who isn't alone tonight?
Boris Slutsky (1919-86) writes:

"a sailor brings/ Tattoos of purple to our landlocked
/ Landlubber's locality —" I open

the dictionary to the word *thrum*, tonight's
password. Perhaps Dante will bore me soon and

I can sleep, but no. Even Satan's asshole
is a spectacle. Rain slides off the letter V
upside down, the letter beloved by architects.
I'm sliding off my version of the world.

In *Inferno*, it rains sulfur — what a mess,
what a shine. I go to sleep in this red city
of my constant losses by listening to this
dark rain seeking refuge in eyes after eyes.

SCOTLAND

It was a weekday afternoon, around two,
the hour some drinkers call the Demon,
and I was possessed by the feeling

that nothing had really changed for me
since childhood,
that I was spinning my wheels in a sandbox,

or let's say that I had been pedaling
around Scotland since 1941,
on the same maroon 3-speed Raleigh bicycle —

that I had begun my life
with clips on my trousers,
pushing off by the side of a garage,

throwing a leg over the crossbar,
then crunching down a straight gravel path.
And now, near the end of the century

I was still moving over the same
wind-shocked hills, sheep holding on for dear life,
and my terrier curled on a tartan blanket

in my large wicker carrier basket.
All my pedaling has been done in silence — my drug —
except whenever I came to an intersection —

a birthday, a wedding, a death —
and then I would ring the bell on the handlebar.
Otherwise, I kept my thoughts to myself,

thoughts of rhetoric and the physical sciences
whenever I had to strain uphill
bending under a stiff wind,

and when I reached a rise and coasted down,
I thought of nothing
but the encrofted cows, and the low hovering clouds.

God knows what I must look like by now,
my shoulders slumped
my face saying the end of the world is coming

which it will soon enough for me,
bringing all my pedaling to a close,
easing the pressure of my thumb on the silvery bell.

Then I will dismount, swinging
a leg over the crossbar, standing on one pedal
while the bike slows to a stop

and falls over on its side with me under it,
all the traffic whizzing by
and a woman in a drab raincoat walking over to see.

IDIOMATIC

It is a big question to pose so early in the morning
or "in the light woven by birds,"
as the Estonians say,
but still I must ask what is my place in life?
my "seat on the invisible train,"
as they say in Hungary.
I mean why am I just sitting here
in a lawn chair listening to a thrush,
"the little entertainer of the woods,"
as the Swiss call him,
while out there in the world
mobs of people are rushing over bridges
in and out of the cities.
Vegetables grow heavy in their fields,
clouds fly across the "face of the earth,"
as we call it in English,
and sometimes rockets lift off in the distance —
and I mean that quite literally,
"from the top of the table" as the Portuguese have it,
real rockets rising from the horizon,
or "the big line," if you're an Australian,
leaving behind rich gowns of exhaust smoke,
long, smooth trajectories,
and always the ocean below,
"the water machine," as the islanders put it —
everything taking place right on schedule,
"by the clock of the devil,"
as our grandparents were fond of saying.
And still here I sit with my shirt off,
the dog at my side, daydreaming —
"juggling balls of cotton," as they like to say in France.

TOURISTS

The Pilgrims landed here in 1620, camped
five weeks, then sailed off to Plymouth —
the first tourists. Month of rain,

no wonder they left — dune grass dragged,
the sea pitched and pale. Month of rain.
Each day I zip my body on again,

feed the neighborhood cat
outside, under the eaves (everything drips —
picnic table, cedar trees, someone's yellow shirt

abandoned on the line). *There is no country
more profoundly dreary*, Thoreau said,
after his long walk — tip of the continent's

curly tail, nothing to eat but salt-cod and beans.
Narrow country. Country of rain.
Out in the garden, the dead sunflowers

shudder and lean — black bones of August,
a nuthatch picks at their drooped heads.
Like them, when we're dead

we're not really dead — or so the Book
of Terrible Promises promises. In two months
the seals come back to Herring Cove, haul out

on the beach — a dozen thick-furred yams.
The sand eels come back, the coots,
the humpback whales — fluke silhouettes

in the green distance. But not us —
we're off to the afterlife in our white suits,
to sip our cocktails of light. *Remember*

*that country? we'll say. Country of rain,
where the living tend their small fires.
Nice place to visit. Nice place,

except for the weather, the people, the food. . .*

OVID IN FLORIDA

All the day the sky burned clear and blue
as propane — too hot to think, too hot
even in the a.c.'s chilly wheeze.

Now the wind's picking up. Across the street,
the sick banana tree flaps its green ears.
Nobody writes anymore. Nobody calls —

the City rattles off with its rusty shopping cart;
forgets you the moment you leave.
Tornado light. Dark skyline of clouds

in the west — the first fat drops of rain
ring like spent shells on the car port.
The neighbor's parrot cackles and shrieks

from their porch — some days it says *hello*,
hello, and I hope it's talking to me.
Lightning jabs the ballfield with its bent fork.

The rain falls as if it will never stop, and then
it stops. Out on the walk, a hornet stings
a spider the size of a woman's hand,

which quivers and wilts. Sit still around here
and something will get you —
even the houseplants look hungry,

even this flamingo-colored sunset
erupting over the chemical plant,
the cooked lawn's ascensions of steam. . .

ALMOST A VOICE

Listen as slowly as you can.
Your skin doesn't say.

No word from the window blinds,
nor the man resembling a beef stew.

Nor the storm that shook February
by the shoulders,

cold-cocked March,
nor the goldenrod come up again

with a start, nor a river's dawn nor an ocean's night
flaunting their own laws,

nor today, deep and velvety
with reams of sombre light.

There's a fifth season
floating above all the others,

full of permanent separations
and troubles that have gotten bored with us;

full of My uncle was, My mother was,
I was.

ORDINANCE SURVEY

What a county owns: Caves, the first and last
of nothing; rocks that rolled downhill
once, and stuck.

A boy compelled to walk at night
and look through strangers' windows,
a "peeping tom"
whose mother tries to stop him
with her own body.

A fourteen-year-old girl
who after her baby is born begins
to count the barbs in wire
so she won't kill the small one who's here
to eat her heart.

She remembers a car ride past a row
of flickering slender trees.
"Poplars, for a wind break," her mother said.
The car went on and on and didn't stop.

Where are all of them? No one's looking,
not the dark's greased wheels,
the pond's musty inverted tent, the woods'
leaves drowning
in leaves, a dry ocean,

not the bleached grasses,
the paths stumbling downhill,
the trotting animals, the bare hand strewing feed, the
salt block's gleaming skull next to the trough,
the gate that hangs on its hinge,
caught in the act
of closing and opening.

ARSENIO

Dust devils of wind throw dust up
over the roofs, eddying through the empty
spaces, where hooded horses
nose the ground, tethered in front
of the glistening windows of hotels.
Onto the terrace that faces the sea, you descend
on this day
now rain-swept now sun-fired, in which it seems
the hours tick off all alike into an equal confusion,
a refrain, the same old song, of castanets.

It's the sign of another orbit: you follow it.
You descend to the horizon overhung
by a lead-colored waterspout high over its vortex,
more vagrant than it is: salty cloud-shower
and maelstrom, blown back by the untied
elements to the clouds; let your footsteps
crunch on the gravel, then trip yourself up
in the tangle of seaweed: that moment,
perhaps, so long awaited, is the escape
from your journey's end, link
in a chain, unmoving movement, all too familiar
ecstasy, Arsenio, of immobility . . .

Listen among the palm fronds to the quivering spurt
of violins, cut short when thunder rolls
with the wah-wah of struck sheet metal;
the storm is sweet when
it throws up the Dog Star, white
in the blue sky, and the night that is so near
seems far away: if lightning cuts it,
it branches like a precious tree
inside the light that sunsets: and the kettledrum
of the gipsies is its fading-away rumbling.

You descend into a descending darkness
that changes the noontime into a night
of lit lamps strung out on the shore line —
and out there, where a single shadow gathers together
sea and sky, acetylene torches throb
from a few boats in its belly —

until a few hesitant drops
fall from the sky, the ground steams as it takes them in,
everything swashes around you, soaked awnings
flap, an immense rustle scrapes
the ground, and down to the streets
go the limp, hissing paper lanterns.

Thus, lost among wickerwork and drenched
reed-matting, a reed yourself dragging
your roots behind you, slimy, never
svelte; you tremble with life and lean toward
an emptiness resonant with suppressed
cries, as the lip of the old wave you turn to
swallows you again; and again,
everything that takes you back, street portico
wall mirrors fixes you in a single
frozen multitude of the dead,
and if one gesture touches you, one word
falls next to you, that, Arsenio,
in the dissolving hour, perhaps is the sign
of a strangled life emerging for you, and the wind
carries it off with the ashes of the stars.

HOUSE BY THE SEA

The journey ends here:
in the petty cares that split
the soul, which doesn't know which way to turn.
Now the minutes are as regular and fixed
as a pump wheel.
One turn: water comes up with a rush.
Another turn, other water, different creaking.

The journey ends at this beach,
tested by slow, assiduous waters.
Nothing's revealed but lazy sea mists
veiling and unveiling over the sea-troughed
coast line: and rarely
do crested Corsica or Capraia appear
in the dumb calm
among the migrant islands of air.

You ask if everything vanishes like this,
in this thin mist of memories;
if in the torpid hour or in the breaker's
sigh every destiny is carried out.
I'd like to say no, that near at hand's
the hour when you will pass out of time;
perhaps only those who wish it can become infinite,
and one of them could be you, who knows, not I.
I think that for the many there's no salvation,
but someone always spoils every design,
breaks clear, and finds what he wants to be.
Before I give up I'd like to show you
this way out
frail as sea-foam or sea-walk
in the rumpled fields of ocean.
I give you also my mean hope.
Too tired, I don't know how, in the coming days, to grow it:

I offer it as pledge to your fate, so you can escape.

The road ends on this shore
eroded by tide-wash and tide-wipe.
Your nearby heart that doesn't hear me
already, perhaps, weighs anchor for the eternal.

translated by Charles Wright

THE RIVER IN ALL LIGHTS, FROM AN UPSTAIRS WINDOW

The river in all lights, from an upstairs window:
The river sometimes like a ribbon of blood.
The river with water hyacinths, blood-brown stems
and lilac heads, iron rusting to blue.
The river blue on blue under the sun.
The river nicked with white as the wind rises.
The river darkened to steel, with copper glints,
or elephant-blue under a thunderous sky.
Now the horizon is lost, the opposite shore
lost as the river roils and mirrors itself.
Now there is only a ribbon of glistening mist
we call the river. Now there is only sky.

from A LONG-GONE SUN

"IN VIOLET CIRCLES . . ."

In violet circles
the school bell
calls us back at dusk
from the allotment garden
my father plants and tends not far from the village
Identical others unroll
their vegetable beds
on ground flat as a swamp
There, children play forbidden games
exploring their uncertain borders
in huts of wild reeds
Coming from who knows where
bats begin
their zigzagging flight
Proud garlic blooms hoist themselves on spindly stems
violet tears at the edge of their lashes
as if the bell had drunk their color
before calling us into the shadows

“YEARS LATER, AFTER THE WAR . . .”

Years later, after the war, my grandmother
bends down over a pile of shoes
looking for the most comfortable pair
among those stacked in a corner of the garage
All kinds of things are kept in that enclosure
which serves as a storage space
an always-cool pantry opening into the kitchen
A table pushed against a wall
holds a quantity of foodstuffs
Onions (my grandmother will bite into one
raw, like a fruit, as she passes, or after dessert)
lie alongside prunes
the glimmer of radishes mingles
with potatoes' ashy skins
The cupboard, which is also full to bursting,
spills over with fragrances even if
since the little girls outgrew their childhood
it no longer holds bowls of fresh milk
covered with a thick skin
yellow and crackled
which they used to spread on crusty bread after school
nor the flans, semolina cakes, gold-crust ed pies
My grandmother sighs: it's her day to visit
her sister, a widow like herself
owner of a house ring ed by vineyards
on a sandy stretch of land outside the town
now rapidly being built up
She must go out there
walk a mile-and-a-half or two
so she can once again compare her lot
with that of her family's other branch
The master-mason's trade
practiced by her nephew
will always seem much more desirable to her
than that of her two schoolteacher daughters

or at least than her son-in-law's last employment
It was also on that modest property
that she first met my grandfather
Is she making a pilgrimage?
She's put on her shoes
is about to push open one side of the garage door
That storeroom with its ranks of shelves
where fine wines were once laid down
is like a seashell closed on emptiness
since its occupant, the car,
disappeared with its driver
But the owner of the Citroën 11CV
was not laid to rest in a cemetery
but in the sandy anonymity
of the soil of western Germany
towards which another black Citroën took him
before the rail convoys
from Fresnes to Neu Bremm Sachsenhausen
Oranienburg Bergen-Belsen
This garage was only a dream of progress
shattered against the wall of history
My grandmother was, in a sense,
the chosen witness to this tragedy
an impotent witness and, as always,
present against her will

“WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT THE SOMBER HOURS . . .”

What do we know about the somber hours
my grandmother spends in tête-à-tête with my father
when, in secret, he comes back across the border
between occupied and Vichy France
We know of one episode
which almost ended tragically
The two of them are in the kitchen
sitting in front of the radio
My grandmother has just removed the yellow cozy
with its gay tangle of flowers
A broadcast from London?
Perhaps my father has spread out some papers
on the table, cleared of dinner dishes
He has made the long journey on his bicycle
and, fit as he is, he feels tired out
Wine, food, drowsiness
And since she has been, despite herself, more isolated
my grandmother has lost some of her vigor
Finished, now, the comings and goings of visitors
the perpetual parade
of an extended peasant clan
come into town to market or to a fair;
the procession of all the old-age pensioners:
my grandfather's old bakery worker
who came every day to play *belote*
and, after his friend's death
still visited his widow every day
Three (or four or five) o'clock
those old church-school boys would sing out
when they heard the clock ring the hour
remember that we are
in the holy presence of God
May Jesus live in our hearts forever
so the card game seemed
like a sacred rite;

the retired Paris policeman
a centaur, half-man half-bicycle
with bicycle clips always attached to his pants-legs;
the ex-postman who'd lost an arm in the first war;
the procession of voters
besieging my father with requests
War has changed people's habits
Transportation is difficult
they stay home
Close friends have died, are dying
The current of life
bypasses the emptied house's island
All the more reason to enjoy the rare
conviviality of that winter evening
The gas stove is turned on high for heat
Movements become fewer, draw themselves out
My father, with a last burst of energy
throws open the kitchen door
A gust of freezing air rushes in just when
they would have sunk into unconsciousness
They would have been found, inert, in the morning
My grandmother would have escaped
a slow slide towards a solitary death
My father would have been victim of this personal
gas chamber, not of collective dysentery
in a German concentration camp
What guardian angel was watching over them
what demon?

translated by Marilyn Hacker

AT MOUNT ZION

If I make myself still
the voices will pass through me
baffled and feast
on the things of this room
calling the night glass
fool and the light switch
faggot.

Little dusty knickknacks
that I failed to care for
on my journey from home:
snapshot of a child
foxed at one corner,
frayed silk rose
with a rigid serrated leaf,
key, tiny mirror...

Tarnished now, eddying
in the whirlpool of judgment:
Bad mirror... stupid rose...

All night I hide
at the confines of my body,
no defense, no resistance,
one finger to my lips
to keep me from answering.

MAIDEN VOYAGE

My father made me
a paper boat
and I watched trembling,
certain he would fail.

Victory
but it took all my faith
to see tiny funnels,
a hull, bulwarks,
and in the fine print
portholes, children
waving farewell.

He set it on the Vistula
and the current took it
filling and darkening
toward the Baltic.

I ran along the towpath
shouting *Come Back*.

When I looked behind me
my father was tiny
and flickered at the edges,
toy hands cupped
around a missing mouth.

HOW IT IS DONE

You go inside, take off your shoes,
enter the room everyone else believes is too dark,
open the small drawer of the ebony desk
your father brought back from his year in Japan
with its carved heads and torsos of dragons and serpents —
so many your mother sent it to the cellar.
You take out the pen and the bottle
of India ink, black as the dragons' ebony eyes,
then from the back the sheaf of paper, so white
it is new snow against the window the day
the power lines were downed by the storm.
For a long time you look through that window,
and finally make your way out of that room,
that house. You walk without considering the hidden
existence of sidewalks or the carless streets. You are careless.
You tunnel through drifts or climb them,
and you keep on like this until it snows enough
to hide your way back, as you are doing now,
one word at a time.

ARS POETICA

The last patient undoes his death by telling me he already died on the operating table. His eyes he says opened to luminosity without figures. He says that: luminosity without figures. This in a man without any education to speak of. He has on a miner's hat. The lamp is flickering. There is rain in his eyes. Forget the miner's hat. Remember it. Young clouds are informed the sky where they live was once empty, black. A cloud school is very informal. After a long time, a sea. Prints of bare feet remarkably like our own cross limestone at the bottom of a gorge and disappear. The plain below is littered with scalpels, mattresses, dead batteries. The anesthesia I use just keeps talking and talking. A man descends on a platform outside my window and begins to wash it. I bend over my poem. My scattered note-poem. My wooden doodling. Each of us pretends the other isn't there. He is more successful. I am one more transparency in a long line. There are green and red snakes on his arms. What an artist with the squeegee! Swish, swoosh, figure eights, no smears, no lines.

OK, LET ME TELL YOU WHERE I'M COMING FROM,

not where I am, that's always changing. The therapist whose show runs from two to four wants to throttle a blond voice with brown roots. I more than understand. I punch a button. Another — Politics or sports? Politics. At least I think. Today is the death penalty. A voice from North Carolina slow as syrup wants to talk about the "premises" of the host of the show. Paranoids live in small windowless rooms listening to the radio talk to them. The host laughs, wise, cynical. The man in the car next to me at the light grins, then sees me looking at him. Premises are "where you're at." The light changes. The caller stammers. The man in the other car squeals away. His words can't keep up with his thoughts. This is an everyday problem for him. He just needs to slow down, not get excited, think what if he was the one who killed somebody? But the host has already cut him off and gone to Bill who's been waiting an hour on a car phone in South Bend, Indiana. What do you know? Bills everywhere today. A star appears on my windshield. I drive straight into it.

BOYISH

I knocked three teeth down
the bulldog's throat, I know
by the way he choked
as I rattled clear of the fence,
my belly full of green peaches,
the sky riding changeless
oxytones, the gray nettles
stuck to my trouser legs.
Rocks and tree roots clogged
Bowman Acres and dead water
rose along my ankles. What is it
now in the door slamming
and floors shaking that resonates
so that someone seems always
to be leaving? Dark daylight hammers
on the roof until the house topples.
I knocked three times.
The dog raced along blue water,
picked up a bike chain and tossed it.
A water cooler pumped air
and water backward into
a dream of bluegrass.
I picked up a chair and knocked
the dog in the head, one tooth
hanging from a dark red
strand like a dragonfly.
Returning now I ask the clouds
for caution. I lie in state in a rubber raft
with gin balancing a coaster.
Cicadas vibrate, bats loop
and surrender. When the radio voice
rises in the lawn next door
I decide I am no longer young.
Highwater fear, I can see
my plunder, though I never
was there, or anywhere.

DESCANT

Rain against

the tarmac, its clumsy, lyric moans,
is a concertina.

A woman in a black hat turns the corner, then nothing else
Nothing happens. Happening: *happens*
stretched out like a beautiful woman's veil as it slips

out of sight around the corner of a building. Or a beautiful man's
Or a beautiful woman's. An old song, itself, that
will not declare.

And imagine the one who sees the woman,
the hat,
the veil, then does not see her,

stays up nights translating
Paris Spleen into Portuguese.
Rein n'egale en longueur les boiteuses journees, the person will think

later, but in Spanish while remembering
the click of the woman's heels,
counting each uneven

rise and fall. It is a type of mathematics: geometry of
forgetfulness. Articulate
vanishings. The weight of failure measured out in tin cups.

Here's another. Glenn Gould groans
the melody as he plays Bach's two part
inventions. Exercise in allegory: the right hand
will be desire, thus,
the left hand — consolation, the keys
a woman in a black hat

turning a corner. Now the notes are short-haired
boys; he loses the tempo. The music grows
wrong, milk begins

to spoil. Gould stands up,
his suit moist
with the smell of overripe nectarines (their smooth

skin splitting
open) which he keeps
in his coat pocket. What does he say? His hand

moves across his eyes. He bows, walks
offstage. *Memoria*
memoriae. Only saints,

someone in the audience will whisper, get
lesions as angry as red wasps.

The sensuous marries

moment with memory. Permanence worries,
composes itself into corners:
<AB, <BC, etc., you know

the rest. Places where things
touch, cling like orangey pulp slicking
Glenn Gould's fingers after the recital.

The erotics of remembering in right angles.

Coitus memoriae. But the woman
in the black hat? An old song that

still will not say, like the *cantus*
firmus that drifts down from an abbey,
and lays its long dark name

across the face of the water.

To begin with
something was missing, something

silver you could see glinting like a parenthesis
beneath the surface of the lake. Or like an eyelid.

An embouchure for the mind's returning.

Sparrow-chatter fills fictive trees and all
origins are again indecipherable.
Once more, *rubato*.

NOW THE YELLOW BREECHES

Now the Yellow Breeches,
that sweet-teaed tributary of the Susquehanna, splints the light
desire-ways, it turns —
wet supremacist —

on the soft satisfactions of silt.
Now it runs on
in rivulets, ladling
its sprawl, its trenchant vinegar

through the undercanopy,
through the fox grape and catbriar.
One fragrance, one craving, one limestone octave
after another,

the Yellow Breeches blossoms
against the cement retaining wall,
foamlicked & fungal, a few
long stones, underneath,

transomed, as if a reflection
of the south bank, where
trees divide field from spackled sky, where ducks
on the mud-slick berm prance

leary & awkward
in their orange boots. Mercy
how the Yellow Breeches urges its lips
against the elder's garnet plumage,

how it savors, how it enchants,
its tongue maternal and humungous
with glee; mercy, Lord
have mercy, how it slivers past,

how the Yellow Breeches
sands down its keel, bevels
and wraps its ribs around answers
nobody's found the question for.

SHOUT OUT

This is a shout out to the only rap show
this side of the Susquehanna, a shout out
to P-Man for mixing Nas with Wu-Tang,

the new one by the Gravediggaz
with Tupac, 'Lil. Kim, & Big E. Small.
So props to the records, stacked like mica,

the CDs diesel and sedimentary on tables,
speakers, floors; props to the haywire
of input, output, knobs that slide,

dial, click; props to the flyest,
bombest, off the hookest sampling
of ghetto life in this cowpatty on fieldstone

of a town; mad props
to the requests pouring in,
props to the white bread farm kids,

the Army War College kids, to all
the relocated sons and daughters who
white, black, pink, green wish they were blacker,

who dress up in Timbs, Tommys, DLO, Fubu —
citified fatigues — all the blow
blowhards who are afraid & therefore

not afraid to puff a blunt & get hype,
who aren't urban but have urban hormones,
have 14-year-old beeper-wearing, AK-toting,

crack-selling pipsqueeks for hormones
marketing the latest in down-n-out attitude, the newest
in pseudo-revolutionary, consumer-as-gangster fashion

through the shopping malls
& Yo MTV Raps of their veins;
peace out, kid, for real.

PATSY CLINE

On the radio Patsy Cline forgives her man again
for all the good it'll do.

The gas is low and the light on the speedometer
a long time dead.

I'm following the curve of the white line
between columns of ghost trees,
the headlights brush against them
like the sudden intrusion of indecent hands,
all windows open, sailing the night
over mile on mile of dead rabbits like soft stones.

I'm thinking of the nights at home, of symphonies of croaking frogs
and swimming past the white rope
where Peggy drowned.

She was so good in the water, even with a cramp
she must have fought for a long time in the dark.

Winters I expect to hit ice
hidden in the shadow of a curve,
or on a perfect summer night
meet a drunk head-on.

Last fall at the bottom of the arroyo, we found Elizabeth, the lost bride,
her head all alone in the buick's back seat,
her little blue cap still pinned in place, her face doll perfect.

No one ever found the guy who'd taken off
with the stop sign.

I had this taste on my lips,
like rust.

YOU SAT UNDER AN ELM

You sat under an elm writing a letter in your diary with a stub of pencil

“June 3,
Cold Harbor,
I was killed.”

The smoke still drifted across the field, and the elm, bewildered,
every leaf shot off.

You were the kind of boy who before battle, given the chance, would
have pinned your name on scraps of paper inside your shirt,
on your cartridge belt, under your bed roll
inside the sweatband of your cap, so
unless a shell made you into birdseed,
your mother would know.

Waiting under the Virginia sun, you watched the blades of wild grass
flick from green to silver, back to green,
and that afternoon in the breeze coming
across the grass from the hills, you became
plain as the sole of a shoe,
your last breath durable as dirt.

IN THE RATHOLE

A street of madhouses,
Each one with a backyard swing,
A smoking barbecue pit,

And someone like you or me

Down in the hole
Kneeling with a clip-on halo
Before a baited trap

*

Roll the bones on the floor.
Cramped as it is,
There may be a life-size crucifix
Towering over my words,
Or there may be nothing at all,
Just the raging winds,
The thunder and lightning shows
Of the coming century.

The evils of the world buzz in its favor.

*

Whose foot is on the stairs now?
Who mounts whispering the soul is to be found
In the crack between time and eternity?
Who sneaks a peek in the round mirror
In the love bird's hooded cage?

Fleck of soot tumbled out of a chimney,
Jailhouse floor-sweeping,
Dust-mote suicide floating in the sunlight,
If you have the eyes for the hidden,

You'll be the judge yourself
How close being comes to nothingness.

*

Take it easy, greasy.
This may be the dark dive at road's end.
Where your own heart is being served cold
In devil's dressing.

Old time visionaries may have left behind
A broken toy or two
Strewn here and there on the floor.
A fire-engine with a few wails still left in it
For you to trip over on the way to the can.

*

Playing hide and seek with myself.
Night and day seeking some circumspect way
To sneak up to the hole
And take a peek at the one peeking out.

A small figure seen through the wrong end of a telescope
Packing good and evil in his head like sticks of dynamite.
My tongue's the burning wick, sweetheart.
I'm sporting an orange fright-wig already and so will you.

*

Ever in dispute with all and everything,
Climbing on the roof tonight for a tete-a-tete
With the starry sky.
A lit butt in each rat fink's face
In that floating crap game.

Fellows, I'm an orphan of this century's wars.
Every night I cover my eyes with a different black armband.
The hangman's long, long rope
Makes the world swing over the abyss.

*

I'm catching on, boss.
Mum's the word.
The voluptuous thrill of being nothing
Must be *something*, eh?

It's 2 A.M.

I only have the phosphorescent green light of my wristwatch to
see by.

"Loco Metaphysico," someone calls over my shoulder,
"The house always wins,
The madhouse made of cards."

AFTER ALL

William Matthews, *After All: Last Poems* (Houghton Mifflin, 1998)

Take care of yourself, we sometimes say to one another, parting. We generally mean Stay out of trouble, knowing the various sorts of trouble the world can unexpectedly foist upon us. We're talking about the future. Nobody says Take care of your past.

I lived in a small town once with a woman who constantly revised herself. I didn't know her well, but that was apparently well enough to be informed, meeting her on the street or in a shop, of her latest efforts. "I'm a completely different person!" she would exclaim happily at the end of each report. "Forget the Gwen you used to know." Her casual abandonment of her history, her former selves, struck me as a subtle form of suicide. It's simplistic to say that she's the opposite of William Matthews, but something about her is opposite to something about him.

For among Matthews' unusual gifts was the ability to keep track of himself over time, to recover his former selves whole — not only their time and place but their hopes, their dreads, the emotional color of their landscapes. Their troubles, of course, whatever they were, were not the source of poems but merely occasions for them. Remembering, Matthews knew, is a creative act. In the title poem of his sixth book, "A Happy Childhood," he says it this way:

There's no truth about your childhood,
though there's a story, yours to tend,

like a fire or garden. Make it a good one,
since you'll have to live it out, and all
its revisions, so long as you all shall live. . .

In an essay in *Curiosities* called "Moving Around," Matthews describes his early concept of a poem as a snapshot, one significant moment framed. Soon he wanted to write another kind of poem. "Little of life organizes itself into symbolic moments. And symbolic moments may distort as much as they summarize; in-

deed, they may distort *by* summarizing." He wanted to capture something more complicated, having, to do with time and memory and the stories he had to "tend" and that tended him. He continues, in the essay, to describe one of the first poems he wrote that pleased him in a sustained way:

The man in the poem is in one place, at one time, but he carries his childhood with him, his schooling, his adolescence; no snapshot can do that. . . . He is with those central images and myths about his own life that impede and enliven him. . . . I speak of him as "him" because he is not me. He clearly shares certain crucial situations with me. . . . But when I am done with a poem I walk away from it; he stays in it. In many of my poems he does not appear, or appears disguised as others.

Matthews is one of the poets who happily uses autobiographical material because it is given to him to use but who is alert to the fact that when it enters a poem it is no long autobiography but art. In fact that's also true of "Moving Around," which is the closest thing to an autobiography he wrote and which, of course, isn't one. Halfway through the essay he glances back at the reader to say

Some people like to tell about their lives, but that's not what I mean to do here. I'm interested in the biography of some images, some collisions between my emotional life and the language that binds me to others.

The past is contained in the present, but some of each is fictional, or what's an imagination for?

One of the rewards of reading Matthews' work as a whole is seeing how much he developed, how years of the practice (in both senses) of his art allowed him to arrive on the pages of the later books with an engaging combination of careful thought and spontaneity. Such development is not as common as it sounds. All poets get older, but not all get better, at least not in such a paradigmatic way — as if Matthews were a verb inflecting himself from past to future. Some, like Mary Oliver or Sharon Olds, find a territory and stick to it; others, like W. S. Merwin or Louise

Glück, reinvent their style so completely every few books that it's difficult to recognize an overall direction. From Matthews we have a record, beginning with *Ruining the New Road* in 1970, of a poet who deepened, who developed his gifts of intellect and wit and technical dexterity. The later five of his ten books of poems — *A Happy Childhood* (1984) through *Foreseeable Futures, Blues If You Want, Time and Money* and the posthumously published *After All* — give us a poet who has trained himself to become at ease with the process of discovering who he is on the occasion of a particular poem. "Originality does not consist of saying what no one has ever said before," he quotes James Stephen elsewhere in *Curiosities*, "but in saying exactly what you think yourself." Matthews adds, "It turns out this is surprisingly difficult."

Matthews' poems, while well-traveled and worldly, often have the elegant compression of dreams, and "A Happy Childhood" provides a virtual dream related to his idea that "imaginary selves" are left behind in poems. (I can imagine his being entertained, in this computer age, by the phrase "virtual dream.") One person is many, has been and will be many more. "And in a dream, you're everyone somewhat,/ but not wholly."

. . . I'm leading a rope of children to safety,

through a snowy farm. The farmer comes out
and I have to throw snowballs well to him
so we may pass.

What better image of the serial man who is at once a child, school-boy, and adolescent than "a rope of children"?

Even dreaming, I know

he's my father, at ease in his catcher's
squat, and that the dream has revived
to us both an old unspoken fantasy:

we're a battery. I'm young, I'm brash,
I don't know how to pitch but I can
throw a lamb chop past a wolf. And he

can handle pitchers and control a game.

It's true about dreams and about genes: writing the poem, the poet is partly the father. His stance is easy, and he knows how to handle a poem, that seamless thing. His dreamed self knows how to pitch (if the wolf is any judge) but doesn't yet know he knows.

I look to him for a sign. I'd nod
for anything. The damn thing is hard to grip

without seams, and . . . it fluffs

toward him no faster than the snow
in the dream drifts down. . . .

The children grow more cold
and hungry and cruel to each other
the longer the ball's in the air, and it begins

to melt. By the time it gets to him we'll be
our waking ages, and each of us is himself
alone, and we all join hands and go.

Matthews may be able to write a dream before it melts, but he's no starry-eyed dreamer. *After All* provides further evidence that he's delighted by the world, by the facts of it, its saxophones and lizards and taxis and rivers. Its sheep. "I never met a fact I didn't like," he says in "Finn Sheep." (That's why *Curiosities* is such a clever title for his essays — it describes both object and attitude toward it.) The poem tells of his efforts to find the name of a kind of sheep with "canoe-shaped ears/ like a jackrabbit's" glimpsed from a bus near Edinburgh. After a number of false

starts, Matthews finds a librarian who suggests asking a shepherd and telephones one. Finally

I had the fact I'd frothed with greed for,
I'd felt smarter for a millisecond —
a swift spasm of intelligence,
and then I was dumb again and happy
to moil at my desk.

If Matthews is delighted by the world, he is enchanted by the way memory complicates our perception of the world — not only personal memory (that simultaneous-sequential self) but also the collective memory of language, which is where we put facts to keep them from getting lost.

I suppose all poems are in some way about language, but Matthews has a special relish for its ironies and quirks. A few of the titles in *After All* reflect this, like "Oxymorons" ("famous poet" and "amicable divorce" among them) and "Euphemisms" (in which a British woman speaks of "the gentleman who raped me"). "Promiscuous" marshalls the dictionary definition of the word, with comments:

Sounds

like a long way
to say "slut," that glob of blame we once threw
equally at men and women. . .

But soon

a slut was female. A much-bedded male

got called a ladies' man; he never slept
with sluts. How sluts
got to be sluts is thus a mystery. . . .

But it's more than a matter of etymological interest. Matthews takes obvious pleasure in language on the move, in its sound and structure. He can use diction to characterize someone in a stroke.

and the fact that he can do so across a great social range is a mark of his alert ear. Consider two examples from *After All*, one of them the opening of "Manners":

"Sweetypants," Martha Mitchell (wife of John Mitchell, soon to be Nixon's attorney general) cried, "fetch me a glass of bubbin, won't you?"

The poem, by the way, ends with a look at what words can't do:

My hostess' chill,
insulting grace I fended off with the same
bland good manners I used to stay upstairs

in my head until time had come for food.
A well-fed scholar, I sought out and brought
back a tall bubbin for the nice lady.
Yes, there's a cure for youth, but it's fatal.
And a cure for grace: you say what you mean,
but of course you have to know what that is.

But compare the diction of Martha Mitchell to the next poem in *After All*. This is the entire "Shooting":

It be the usual at first.
This one be bad, that one be worse.

They do this in slow commotion.
They strut, they fuss, something they done

or never done be what they set
fire to and slow turn into fast

because a gun come out and then
gun two, gun three, guns all around

like walls. That mean we be the room.

Language is the apparatus through which Matthews constructs the world, as do all of us; he is more than most of us reflective about it, conscious of its texture in daily life. "It's not/ that I believe *in* words, but I believe/ *by* words," he says in "Finn Sheep." One poem in *After All* concerns itself with the metaphors that truffle pig runners use for truffles; in another, when a job interview committee member asks the standard question about where he sees himself in five years, the speaker thinks to himself, "Not here. . . . A good thing I// speak fluent Fog." In another setting, "The Place on the Corner," language plays a different protective role:

None here thinks a pink slip
("You're fired," with boilerplate apologies)
is underwear. None here says "lingerie"
or "as it were." We speak Demotic
because we're disguised as ordinary
folks. A shared culture offers camouflage
behind which we can tend the covert fires
we feed our shames to, those things we most fear
to say, our burled, unspoken, common language —
the only one, and we are many.

Matthews was many; some of them he has left behind in his poems, and his translations. The two endeavors were of course related: the epigrammatic swordplay of Martial and the disturbing moodiness of Follain also inhabit his own poems — Follain more in his earlier work and Martial more in the later. There are other markers of the changes in his style over time. *After All* continues a movement toward more formal-looking poems, containing as it does nine sonnets and many poems, some rhymed, composed of stanzas of a set number of lines. These poems fulfill their formal constraints while seeming to be amiably unconcerned with doing so. A ghazal, playfully titled "Frazzle," contains the repeated phrase which is the book's title. There is unobtrusive dazzle in this.

There are things that will not rise to language because we do

not let them, as in "The Place on the Corner." There are things that will not rise to language despite enormous efforts. In "A Poetry Reading at West Point" Matthews gives the most direct answer he can muster to a cadet who yells from the balcony, "Why do your poems give/ me a headache when I try// to understand them?"

I have a gift for
gentle jokes to defuse tension,
but this was not the time to use it.
"I try to write as well as I can
what it feels like to be human,"

I started, picking my way carefully,
for he and I were, after
all, pained by the same dumb longings.
"I try to say what I don't know
how to say, but of course I can't
get much of it down at all."

By now I was sweating bullets.
"I don't want my poems to be hard,
unless the truth is, if there is
a truth." Silence hung in the hall
like a heavy fabric. Now my
head ached. "Sir," he yelled. "Thank you. Sir."

"He's a great bunch of guys," Matthews quotes another musician about Stan Getz. One could say the same of Matthews. He was a poet. And he was one of us, whoever we are.

Pamela Alexander

ON SYNTAX IN POETRY

with a discussion of Carl Phillips, *From the Devotions* (Graywolf, 1998)

No less than the metrical poets who preceded us, contemporary poets, no matter how free our verse, tend to live by the line. To discuss form is almost invariably to pursue line length, line break, rhythm; almost never is the counterpointing sentence the subject of critical consideration. Looking at a great deal of contemporary verse, one understands why.

Looking back is another matter. If our predecessors lived by the line, they loved equally the syntax it plays against. It has been argued that complex syntax is elitist in origin as well as effect: If Shakespeare had little Latin, he at least had some of that inflected language, which, more readily than English, invites its users to shift the parts of sentences for effect. Some of my students inevitably identify the subject of "That time of year thou may'st in me behold" as "that time of year," and it's not just a matter of grammar: they don't get the "sense" of the sonnet's first quatrain either, much less the way feeling is produced by the intertwining of vehicle and tenor, object and prepositional object. They may also have trouble following the emotional argument of "When in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes," missing the way the sonnet's long sentence imitates for the reader the process it depicts. If we really *listen* to the catalogue of woes contained in the "when" clause of the octave, the "thought of thee" that the sestet presents really *does* rise like "the lark at break of day."

Sentences beginning with extended dependent clauses are of course but one example of the periodic sentence, that mainstay of old-fashioned oratory used to keep the audience in a state of suspension, waiting for the subject to arrive. Whitman, whom no one would call elitist, is a master of oratorical style. Here's a Whitmanian "When" poem that uses anaphoric repetition (as orators used to do, even as recently as Martin Luther King) to both amplify and simplify its single sentence:

When I heard the learn'd astronomer,
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before
me,
When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide,
and measure them,
When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with
much applause in the lecture-room,
How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,
Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.

The repetition of "when" makes the sentence easier to follow than Shakespeare's, but the result is a similar confluence of syntax and the experience (increasingly dreary, till the sentence itself turns on "till") that it presents.

In another famous Whitmanian periodic sentence, the first stanza of "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," fifteen lines of prepositional phrases, a number of them modified by dependent clauses or participial phrases, simultaneously move the reader forward through space and backward through time until the main clause of the sentence finally appears, with some interruption and a final inversion, in the last three lines of the stanza: before it is even identified, the "reminiscence" the poet is about to sing has begun to be experienced.

There are echoes of these syntactic strategies in more recent poetry. It's hard not to hear "out of the Cradle" in Philip Levine's "They Feed They Lion" ("out of burlap sacks, out of bearing butter, / Out of black bean and wet slate bread . . ."), and Robert Hayden's "Frederick Douglass" develops and repeats a "When" clause ("When it is finally ours, this freedom, this liberty, this beautiful / and terrible thing") for the first six lines of a fourteen-line poem that owes much to both the oratorical tradition and to Shakespeare, the argument of whose Sonnet #55 it recalls.

But oratorically extended sentences are rare in the poetry of our century, and we're even less likely to find syntax that forces

us, mid-sentence, to forego our expectations of “normal word order” and wrestle almost physically with the language. Hopkins, the priest for whom Latin was an even more everyday affair than it was for Shakespeare the schoolboy, comes to mind: the way the syntax (not merely the often-praised sprung rhythm) suspends the reader, like the bird itself, at the beginning of “The Windhover”; the way the sentence itself tries to accomplish what it talks about at the beginning of “The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo”: “How to keep — is there any any, is there none such, nowhere known some, bow or brooch or braid or brace, lace, latch or catch or key to keep / Back beauty, keep it, beauty, beauty, beauty, . . . from vanishing away?” Or these lines at the end of “I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day”:

Selfyeast of spirit a dull dough sours. I see
The lost are like this, and their scourge to be
As I am mine, their sweating selves; but worse.

Hopkins could have written “Selfyeast of spirit sours a dull dough,” or, in the exact meter in which he wrote, “their scourge to be / Their sweating selves, as I am mine”; a contemporary workshop might indeed have made such suggestions. But the selfyeast line would have seemed facilely aphoristic, and the emotional anguish at the heart of the poem would have been lessened.

Which brings me to Carl Phillips, a poet whose work I know too well to review, but who for the very reason of that familiarity comes easily and centrally to mind when I think about syntax. I should note at the outset that Phillips is not the only contemporary poet whose syntax I admire and learn from; among others whose work impresses me in this regard are Linda Gregerson, Mark Strand, and Charles Wright.

But syntax may be a more consciously central concern for Phillips. In a recent interview in *Callaloo*, he said:

I believe I learned most about poetry from reading — in the original Latin and Greek — the political speeches of Cicero and those that occur in the historical writings of

Thucydides, respectively. When I was going to do a PhD in classical philology, my plan had been to focus on rhetoric and oratory and the manipulation of syntax to create a particular effect in one's audience, something that Cicero especially seems to be a master of.

One effect of Phillips' experience with classical languages is, as in Hopkins, an ability to manipulate word order at even the smallest level. As anyone who has tried to translate poems from a heavily inflected language knows, the order of subjects, verbs, objects and modifiers often has to be changed in translation, which means that the poem is "experienced" differently. Almost inevitably, for instance, Trakl's line "Am Abend weht von unseren Sternen ein eisiger Wind" becomes something like "in the evening an icy wind blows from our stars," in that order, rather than, as in German, "blows from our stars an icy wind" — an order which *follows* the wind rather than merely talking about it, but which in English makes altogether the wrong "sense."

But it's possible to manipulate even English syntax. Here is a brief passage from Phillips' "Honey Hush," describing the annual swim of deer from one island to another:

. . . From the shore, children
make of their small hands small binoculars,

and guess at which ones will drown.
For some of the deer always drown.
They lose, I think, whatever for a deer

hope can be.

More "ordinary" syntax would have the children "make small binoculars with their hands," shifting the focus from both the primary image (the hands) and the process, and would introduce "hope" before the end of the second sentence, shifting the focus from the animal to the human a little too smugly and too soon.

Another brief example: "In the Days of Thrown Confetti" describes the process of throwing confetti to attract birds, "that they

should be, / on purpose, disappointed." The poem ends: "When they rose, / they carried with them, / took someplace else their hunger." The last two lines are much more disturbing than the more predictable alternative, "carried their hunger with them, / took it someplace else," which would have given the poem more definitive closure, the reader more distance from the hungry birds.

Such small moves in Carl Phillips' poems may not be consciously driven by his awareness of syntax; larger strategies clearly are. "As From a Quiver of Arrows" is, but for one declarative sentence, a gathering (quiver?) of twenty questions of varying complexity that deliver (like arrows) variations on the opening line, "What do we do with the body?" More unexpectedly, "The Hunters" is a series of "That" clauses that never become complete sentences, sometimes in fact interrupting themselves with "back-stitching" repetitions that look like new sentences but aren't. Here is the beginning of the first "That" clause, which goes on for another five lines:

That they, in fitful bands, came
and were immediately dismayed: a prairie, no gazelles,

only bees, the usual colored-in flowers.

Were dismayed and — all blond, all bow astrain, all

arrow — were foolish in

the manner of Beauty when it has fumbled a good ball . . .

That the poem is ultimately allegorical is suggested not only by the capitalized "Beauty," but also by the syntax itself, which asks the reader to complete the "that" clauses, perhaps with something like "is a way of saying it."

"Meditation," a six-part poem near the end of *From the Devotions*, offers a number of syntactic experiments. The second section exemplifies its title, "Perfection," by being infinitives — that verb form so appropriately named for its refusal to move through time, to own a subject:

To take everything back, reverse the limbs turned out
outrageous, the breath foundering. To wake from

where flesh — like every other road there — was
hard, lasting. And find it dream — and the dreaming,

enough. To rise full from the long table
of example: the double stags, gutted, skinned, dressed —

all that meat, at last, rendered useful;
the upturned brace of pheasant, still struggling, still

knowing dimly, more dimly, darkly the gamekeeper's
kid-hugged fist. To lie naked, down, and

squired, to either side a lord gone stiff and restive
in full court dress. To steer, on sootless,

drama-less wings those undeeded acres between seduce
and persuade. O never to get, nor have

got there. To thirst gothically, to want —
like a spire: no discernible object but more sky.

The tension in the poem is not unlike that in Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn"; what is original about Phillips' poem is that the tension so clearly resides in the syntax — in the refusal of the verb forms to "get there," despite the elegantly and archaically dressed but nonetheless basic activities — food, sex — that they refer to.

A similarly suspended but very different effect arises from the syntactic strategy of "Surrender," the fourth poem in "Meditation":

As when,
into the canyon that means,
whose name — translated —
means *Without Measure, Sorrow*

from the hand that,
for so long, has meant
give,
but now — broken — gives in,

is released
the garland /swag /bouquet
(that — look,
look again — means

only so much as what it is:
eucalyptus,
kangaroo's paw,
the grass called eel),

that he, impossibly, might catch it.

Though the poem is merely a sentence fragment, the syntax is so complex that a first reading involves an almost physical effort: suspended already on "As when," we're then denied the subject and thrust instead into two complex prepositional phrases, the first giving the unnamed subject's destination (the canyon), the second giving its source (the hand). The subject itself, the "garland /swag /bouquet," is finally "released" in the third stanza (from the hand, into the canyon), but "look / look again," for the poem isn't finished: the last line introduces, in some tension with the first stanza, a more immediate destination of the bouquet — the "he" who "might catch it." The poem is of course an elaborate metaphor that foregrounds its figurative nature ("whose name — translated," "means only"), but it's also a bit surreal; that it's able to involve us in the difficult business of trying to catch the poem itself is one way of describing the effect of its complex syntax.

Here is one more section of "Meditation," "The River Road"; its more varied syntactic strategy is not so easily described:

That certain birds —
the eagle, in whom come together in

something like marriage rapaciousness, grace;
or, rapacious too and stuffed with grace,
all manner of falcon, also of hawk each
kind — suggested the archangels:
this makes sense.

And the sky meaning,
more nakedly than usual, only the usual
(*try, you will never match it, this blue*),
the river widening to reflect so much more
of the same — and weren't you hungry,
besides? — how difficult was it, just
then, to see God?

But that stretch of
flat barges on hold, each awaiting the one
sign: *Come, the water lies clear*; how, bored,
you turned away toward the chalk, no, chalk-
colored bluffs that all day had been there
but now, regarded, looked
athletic, fallen —

Confess,
it has surprised you, thus to understand the soul.

Unlike "Surrender," this poem seems to point to a real experience — a scene, its elements observed. To that extent, the mode is quite traditional; what "happens" could be summarized in a brief sentence. What is less traditional is the syntax, which offers the scene and its "interpretation" as an extremely complex and fragmented process. In the first stanza, "That certain birds suggested the archangels makes sense" is the simple sentence that is interrupted by so much detail, itself elegantly complex in syntax, that we're as apt to be as surprised by the fact of its completion as we are by the archangels. The second stanza is a bit more complex, more interrupted, its syntax a little less easily parsed; but the third, introduced as a deliberate turn by "but," is more fragmented still — so

much so that it breaks off, unable to complete itself easily, which is in deliberate contrast with the similarly complex but significantly more elegant and properly constructed sentence that makes up the first stanza. The difficult syntax mirrors, or perhaps creates, the emotional “argument” of the poem: as the “interpretations” of the images become more unexpected (birds as angels, sky as God — but barges and cliffs suggesting “the soul”?) the syntax too breaks down, forcing us to work ever harder, until the dash at the end releases us, allows us to acknowledge that “it has surprised” us, too, to find the poem arriving where it does.

Another example of interrupted syntax, from the beginning of one of several “albas” in *From the Devotions*, this one subtitled “Innocence”:

Sunday. The bells, as expected. I cannot
help it if I rise, if finding the room too
fraught with light — all of it, the white
walls, the rinsed notion (always almost

inside then just out of reach) of God, your
body gleaming in sleep where the sun falls
on it and away from, falls on and away —
I have to shut my one good eye and at once

the leaves falling but not blurred make it
possible to see how it happens, a bruise
lifting itself over time from the darker
blues to, slowly, something like amber,

to at least whatever, before the wounding,
the flesh was.

Like the first stanza of “The River Road,” there is a relatively simple “core” sentence at the beginning of this passage (“I cannot help it if, finding the room too fraught with light, I have to shut my one good eye”). That the description of the room is interrupted first by parenthetical dashes and then, within that interrup-

tion, by actual parentheses has the difficult effect of making light (and by implication the innocence of the title) seem heavy, ponderous, even before the subsequent lines do their easier but also complex syntactic work of "re-visioning" innocence through the process of seeing "how it happens," or happens again, that bruised flesh becomes "whatever, before the wounding, / the flesh was."

The syntax of the remainder of the poem is different, but equally "manipulated" to create, as Phillips says of Latin rhetoric, "a particular effect":

. . . Imagining the flesh before
or without knowledge, I want to say it is
most like the song untrained, whose beauty,

when it occurs, surprises even itself —
but isn't it also, more commonly, just
meat, or isn't it a good soil waiting, that
does not, cannot know that it is waiting?

Therefore, it is innocence. Therefore,
a capacity for suffering more vast, even,
than the landscape whose particulars, you
remember, we drove past, the red of sunset

upon them: the bull in mid-lumbering over
the cow (still with patience, with fear?),
almost, not yet inside her; the sudden
bursting of crows, all cinders flying over

where once, presumably, was some small life.
We were tired, hungry, faintly hungry for
each other. We kept driving: east, home,
toward a dark we couldn't fast enough get to.

The almost stately dialectic that opens this second half of the poem ("I want to say," "but isn't it also," "Therefore") contrasts with the more interrupted syntax of the first half; but the intel-

lectual argument is itself interrupted by a remembered scene that, while contrasting in content with the churchbells that open the poem, includes similar syntactic and emotional interruptions. Finally the poem, which began at dawn with a simple "Sunday," ends "toward dark," with a syntactically qualified closure: "a dark we couldn't get to fast enough" would be the expected phrase and also the more comfortable meter, allowing the poem to end on a stressed syllable, whereas ending with "get to" only *points* to destination: the sense of urgency is increased by the syntax, which lands us on a preposition, "faintly hungry," like the speaker and his companion, for something more conclusive.

That "Alba: Innocence," like many of the poems cited above, focusses centrally but sometimes obliquely on the body may reflect either my own predilections or those of Carl Phillips. But syntax itself may be a relevant factor here. In the second chapter of *On Being Blue*, William Gass discusses the limitations of "blue" (in the sense of pornographic) writing. The "ultimate and essential displacement is to the word," he says, and "the true sexuality in literature — sex as a positive aesthetic quality — lies not in any scene and subject, nor in the mere appearance of a vulgar word, nor in the thick smear of a blue spot, but in the consequences on the page of love well made — made to the medium which is the writer's own. . . ." The last paragraph of Gass's chapter begins: "If any of us were as well taken care of as the sentences of Henry James, we'd never long for another, never wander away: where else would we receive such constant attention, our thoughts anticipated, our feelings understood?" Such care is the work, most centrally, of syntax, in poetry as well as in the prose of Henry James.

Martha Collins

BEMUSEMENTS

Lee Upton, **The Muse of Abandonment: Origin, Identity, Mastery in Five American Poets** (Bucknell University Press, 1998)

I elect to write about a critical book this year, rather than a collection or group of collections of poetry, for several reasons. One is that I think the issue of how well or badly current literary criticism manages to describe and assess contemporary poetry is worth taking up and considering. Another is that I think Upton's book, which strikes me as unusually sound and acute, is in danger of being overlooked.

The Muse of Abandonment, brief but pithy, takes up five poets who belong, roughly, to the same generation: Charles Wright, Russell Edson, Jean Valentine, James Tate and Louise Glück. This will strike some readers as a very disparate group, but Upton makes a solid case for viewing them together, acknowledging their many differences while outlining common concerns and insights. She's comfortable, in other words, on the ground that has been called postmodern without feeling the need for elaborate apologia, industrial-strength theoretical framing, or what might be described as sociological or psychological poststructuralist boilerplate. Upton has read around in postmodern theory, clearly, and she can summon a Bachelard or a Blanchot, a Barbara Johnson or a Kristeva to her side with ease to help make a point. But she isn't ruled by this stuff, or overawed by it, and is thus able to operate with a light touch and a deft manner that let her get to her points about her poets without wheeling a lot of ponderous machinery into place.

Big-time theorists, as a rule, usually can't and don't read poetry, especially contemporary poetry. It's beneath or beyond them. And the problem, meanwhile, with a lot of existing commentary on current poetry is much simpler and more practical: the commentator will get hold of a paradigm that was somewhat distortive to begin with — confessional poetry, deep image poetics, the Emersonian tradition — and then try willfully to apply it to poets to whom it is scarcely relevant. It's the spectacle of

Harold Bloom, trying to read Yeats and Stevens as if they were romantic poets, all over again, writ small. One of Upton's first points about her group of five poets is that they are "models of independence," and that "none was appropriated by the reigning aesthetic camps of over a decade ago: the new formalists or the language poets"(12). This helps clear the ground for discussion that is not so thesis-driven or agenda-oriented that the poets serve the paradigm rather than the other way round.

Upton's value as a critic, surely, is based partly on her own achievement as a poet. She knows her way around as a gifted and accomplished practitioner, and while she never flaunts that fact, it gives grounding to her judgments and shape to her insights that I find continually valuable. One trusts her not to misrepresent what poets mean and do and say. And if she says a poem is especially good or especially interesting, she's likely to make the judgment from within the frame and context of contemporary practice. That lends a quiet authority and good sense to the book at every point.

The title, while odd at first glance, turns out to have been carefully considered. Upton uses "Muse" to stand for the extra-rational and extra-volitional aspects of poetry. She speaks of the "inspiring energy" behind the poem, recognizing that in each of these writers, and in their generation more fully, that energy is linked to the idea of abandonment: by loved ones, by metaphysical presences and universals, by community and culture. And "abandon" and "abandonment," as she notes, have a two-edged quality, connoting both desertion and liberation. The inspiring energy or muse that these poets work from both leaves them without assurances and structures that would have made their worlds more orderly, and allows them to break down the borders of self and the accompanying constraints of history and culture. Their responses to this combination of loss and gain are quite various and exhilarating, as Upton proceeds to show.

If there is a reigning muse who can be identified here, by the way, it is, as Upton suggests, Emily Dickinson. Her radicalism comes into its own with this generation of poets (born in the thirties and forties, roughly), and each of them, while notably differ-

ent, can be said to have responded powerfully to Dickinson's experimentation, fragmentation, isolation, refusal of systematic belief and philosophy — to what Lawrence Lipking called, in *Abandoned Women and Poetic Tradition*, giving Upton one of her key terms, "her sense of abandonment." The absent/present mother of us all? Again, one doesn't want to oversimplify, but one sees the truth of the assertion.

The other attendant spirit among these poets may be that of surrealism, not so much in terms of ideological particulars or formulas for writing, but simply in the acknowledgment of the importance and productivity of the unconscious. Its residence in language, in the culture at large, in the activities of the imagination, awake or asleep, is a kind of given that marks these poets historically as third- or fourth-generation inheritors of the surrealist tradition, practitioners who could no more dismiss the unconscious than they could the ideas of self, of language, and of the ultimate mystery of creation. At the same time, they are rightly suspicious of the doctrinaire, either in aesthetic formulations or in psychoanalysis.

Charles Wright is the most fully discussed and widely appreciated of the five poets Upton brings together here. As she notes, his emphasis on a kind of inverted spirituality and religiosity has led many readers to view him "in saintlike terms" (25). She doesn't overtly object to this "near-hagiography," but it clearly bemuses her. Meanwhile, her tour of Wright's kingdom (perhaps monastery would be a better term) notes elements that other commentators have touched upon as well: his fascination with spiritual revelation that never arrives; his preoccupation with images of disappearance and dispersal; his cumulative techniques and their origins in Pound, as well as Dante and Montale, his stylistic marrying of Dickinson and Whitman; and his prevailing melancholia, which is finally based, as her chapter's close acknowledges, on his recognition that "Sadness is truer than happiness." It's a clear and useful account of the world and work of

one of our best poets, and I characterize it briefly here mainly in order to get on to her account of less established and considered figures.

Russell Edson, Upton's next subject, has by contrast hardly been discussed at all, and then seldom as usefully. His moves and his erasures, deeply subversive, are perfectly evident in one sense and perfectly opaque in another: he seems to resist interpretation almost as successfully as he has resisted fame and any coherent relation between the author and the work. Upton moves forward firmly here, brushing aside commentators like Levertov, Bly and Hall, who have argued for the fantasy and whimsy of Edson's work, as well as its opacity. She finds an unmistakable clarity of vision behind the poems, a ringing condemnation of this century's and this culture's unrelenting cruelty. For her, Edson's "concerns are ultimately ethical and reflect his cultural situation" (54). That cultural situation is pretty horrific, since it constrains individuality into forms of pain and negation that are unrelenting and also, from an objective perspective, wildly funny. As she suggests, this poetry "lays cruelty bare by portraying objectification of living beings as the concrete result of cultural ideologies" (55).

The detestation of all cultural forms and norms as imprisoning and dehumanizing helps explain, of course, Edson's devotion to the unpoetic and anti-poetic, not only in his choice of prose but in his eschewing of anything personal, peopling his work with types (Mother, Father, Young Man, Old Woman, etc.) and continually mixing up humans, animals, objects and symbols. Anyone who believes that "structures tragically constrict and deplete human agency" (56) surely ought to proceed as Edson has proceeded, and Upton shows that he has done so with exceptional consistency and integrity. Of course, most people *don't* go this far in their beliefs, but the shock of recognition that they feel when they read Edson testifies to the truth of his insight: that we live in a hugely violent culture, amid inevitable and constant inflictions of pain. His own muse of abandonment is the most frightening

figure in this book and I am convinced by Upton's insistence that, far from being an a-historical fabulist whose weird fantasies cannot be interpreted, Edson "is profoundly political, questioning forms of power summoned in language" (57).

Being political, incidentally, isn't the same as being ideological. In fact, ideology is impossible in Edson's world because it will always restrict and imprison; or rather, it is inevitable but he hopes to have no part of it. His attack on the strictures and oppressions housed in language and invading both private and public realms relentlessly is always a response to the oppressiveness of structure, and no exceptions can exist. Like Wright's religion that can never have true religious content or meaning, Edson's politics can never resolve itself into anything that is an acceptable solution, capable of reversing suffering. This time the response isn't melancholia; it's a hilarity that shades into paranoia and hysteria.

With Jean Valentine, Upton moves to the work of an even more underread and underinterpreted poet. This is a fresh, exciting reading of a difficult and singular writer, set forth with care and a vigorous, exploratory tone. Recognizing the power and originality of Valentine's first book, *Dream Barker*, Upton presents her as one who can work with the universals housed in dreams and the liminal states between waking and sleeping, speaking a language infused with the materials and movements of the unconscious. She follows the progress of a thinning-out of "textual materiality" in the poet's subsequent volumes, and rightly emphasizes her theme of abandonment, especially in human relationships, her poetry of ruptures and departures. While she notes Valentine's fascination with self-destruction, she also understands that this poet "writes 'away' from the impulse" (87) rather than toward it, as in Sexton and Plath. Never overlooking the "gendered dynamics" of the poems, she connects them with Kristeva's notion that a daughter's assimilation by the symbolic order involves a concomitant mother-loss. This first loss becomes the

one by which all others are figured and understood, so that Valentine is finally the author of "a poetics that explores relationships between men and women through the lens of maternal loss" (81), a poetic in which the poems are like "thin membranes stretching over the bottomlessness of primary human need" (81-2).

Just as Upton's characterization of Edson probably overlooked psychological dynamics in its strong emphasis upon the political and cultural meanings, so her account of Valentine threatens to commit the opposite error, ignoring this poet's thoughtful and compassionate response to contemporary history and politics in an excessively psychoanalytic model. She redresses this tendency somewhat in noting how much *Ordinary Things* reflects a preoccupation with the Vietnam war, and in recognizing how the later volumes, *The Messenger* and *The River at Wolf*, broaden the concept of the maternal and take up concerns, such as AIDS, that lie well outside the originary circle of daughters parting from mothers. In this characteristic passage, considering Valentine's link to Bishop and characterizing their difference, Upton shows how deft and precise her readings of her poets can be:

Yet while Bishop is an intensely visual poet, Valentine prefers to suggest the invisible. She explores the arbitrary and tentative ways that meaning may accrue, the way "the water-lit, dotted lines of home started coloring in" (M, 6). She renders contingency and disintegrating presence more often than does Bishop. The details of landscape, the grains of her descriptions: there is seldom the illusion of anything leisurely about accumulations of details in Valentine. From their inception, moments are bound toward heightened psychological significance. (90)

Upton follows this passage with one of the most telling things Valentine has said in interview: "I don't think poets are that interested in recording things. I think they're interested in going through them, going through them like doors. Maybe it is to a world we're seeking, not a world we already know" (90). Not every poet would subscribe to that agenda, but it fits Valentine and her work unerringly.

Upton's chapter endings, since all her poets are still in the trajectory of ongoing careers, are necessarily tentative and open. She feels that *The River at Wolf* may well be Valentine's best book to date (a new one has just appeared, apparently), and she leaves us with a sense both of the continuity of this poet's achievements and anticipation for what is still to come.

James Tate was, among other things, Upton's own teacher, and she displays a familiarity and comfort with his work that makes her discussion of it both authoritative and relaxed. She stresses, rightly, Tate's relinquishing of control of all kinds. Inventing speakers who can't master the phenomena that assault them, he celebrates failure, perversity, and "unresolved paradox." In a comedy less grim than Edson's, we watch a kind of endless metamorphosing of possibilities, roles, states and emotions. The self, as Upton notes, "is reimagined endlessly and detached from origins" (99). The result balances nicely between entropy and a sense of energetic renewal:

I wish to emphasize that I am not seeking to discover a gentle enervation in Tate's poems. In fact, I would like to suggest quite the opposite: that his poetry actively upends identities, retaining the curiousness of assuming selfhood, the perversity of the self to the self, including its shifting mood states and ineffective solutions. (98)

The celebrations of destruction and failure are an impudent critique of a culture that values all the wrong things. Even art and creativity are suspect, especially in their aggrandizing of self and pretense at resolving conflict. Autobiography is phony, and the oracular side of poetry, still active among us, needs to be punctured and ridiculed, over and over again.

Tate has had recognition in recent years, but, again like Edson and Valentine, very little useful commentary. His work, of course, resists it, and it takes as nimble a commentator as Upton to do him justice. She touches on some of his literary affinities,

especially Dickinson, Stevens, and Frank O'Hara. She gently corrects critics like Vendler, James Finn Cotter, and William Logan, who have misread him. And she goes on to a rich tour of his world and work, one that recognizes all his zany music, the expansiveness of his invention in terms of speakers, plots, and scintillating verbal play. Aligning him not with compatriots like Ashbery and Simic, to whom he is frequently compared, Upton lets us see him more freshly by grouping him convincingly with more somber poets like Wright and Valentine, and with the explosive subversiveness toward language and authority housed in the prose poems of Edson. Imagine the three of them trying to collaborate for a moment, and you might get something like Tate's "Goodtime Jesus":

Jesus got up one day a little later than usual. He had been dreaming so deep there was nothing left in his head. What was it? A nightmare, dead bodies walking all around him, eyes rolled back, skin falling off. But he wasn't afraid of that. It was a beautiful day. How 'bout some coffee? Don't mind if I do. Take a little ride on my donkey. I love that donkey. Hell, I love everybody.

Here is Wright's religious preoccupation, Edson's naturalizing of the prose poem, and Valentine's joining of dream worlds with daytime experience. Yet the insouciance and ease are immediately recognizable as Tate's, his hallmark mastery of the American colloquial and its surprising revelations. As Upton notes, the son of God here becomes astonishingly banal, a kid who oversleeps, dreams of Hell (his father's invention), and then goes tooling off on his donkey, "naive, affectionate, and empty-headed . . . crossed between nightly horror and daily pleasantries" (112). What a pleasure to revisit Tate's idiom with such an expert guide.

Louise Glück, according to Upton, investigates, in an almost classical manner, "ineradicable laws of nature and being" (119). The result is both traditional and new: "Since her early career

Glück has been writing a psychological autobiography, detailing the war between flesh and spirit as particularly charged because of her condition as a woman" (119). This may explain her greater appeal to Upton than to me. I have too often found the results of this enterprise both hollow and pretentious, more suggestive on their surfaces than substantial at their core. But I mainly just do not know this poet's work very well and I am glad to have Upton showing me what is there that can be seen as both substantive and original.

One of the issues for Glück and her readers, apparently, is her self-loathing. That and her unrelenting seriousness have, Upton admits, cost her readers. But Upton sees her seriousness as an unrelenting poetics that is much like that of the other four poets here: "Glück may dissatisfy — or infuriate — such readers because she repels ideals of affirmation and harmony in human relationships that women in her culture have been expected to uphold" (121). She too, then, has a muse of abandonment, one whose presence she wills and perhaps constrains. Her work, as Upton shows, is full of rejections and abjections of all kinds, and it may well fascinate some readers simply because negativity feels more powerful to us, in this time and place, than anything positive. Glück's rejections even include her own work in a sense, for each book, as Upton notes, has involved a change of style, a casting off: "Glück has attempted in each of her books to change the style of her work and to change the self — already so perilously impermanent — that makes the poems. She has treated her books as if they were skins that she might shed, as if they, like the body she sought to master in adolescence, might be perfected" (142). Among other things, this practice testifies to the poet's "remarkable will and control," an attempt perhaps to get the upper hand on the muse of abandonment that cuts her off from the liberating side of abandonment except in terms of her regular rejections of her own poetics. If the muse represents involuntary energies, then we try to control and direct them at our peril; our relinquishing of control is a key to the success of the relationship. What I find missing in Glück, even in Upton's sympathetic and attentive account, is that elation and release that sporadically lift

and energize, in such different ways, the poetry of Wright, Edson, Valentine and Tate.

Upton's account of Glück closes her book. Had I been her editor, I might have pressed her to add a short coda or conclusion, reviewing the ground traversed and considering other possibilities. One insight that emerges from the book, I think, is how subversive poetry tends to be, again and again, to the main culture and the official versions of things like history, gender and belief. No wonder poets are variously shunned, ignored, persecuted and feared. What amounts to frontal attack and violent loathing in, say, Edson, takes other forms, hardly less virulent and no less searching, in all five of these poets.

Then there's the issue of how widely Upton's paradigm might be applied. The muse of abandonment might readily be summoned to produce readings of quite a few other poets: Merwin and Ashbery among the previous generation, Strand and Simic among the generation covered. It is interesting too to speculate on the shadowy presence of another muse, one who sponsors tropes of recovery, rediscovery and compensation. That allows us to consider whether another group of poets, containing figures as diverse as Stafford, Stern, Snyder, Willard and Schmitz, may have found ways to balance their mourning of loss and dispersal with reparative encounters and curative imaginings. But one can't blame Upton for not opening that door even as she completes her taxing account of five such fascinating and disparate poets.

I find I have very few quibbles with this handsome study. I do wish that Russell Edson's key essay, "Portrait of the Writer as a Fat Man," had been located where it belongs, as first appearing in these pages and then in the *FIELD Guide to Contemporary Poetry and Poetics*, rather than, much more incidentally, in Donald Hall's collection, *Claims for Poetry*. If origins really are important, then it's worth getting them right.

I also question, as I've indicated, whether Glück's stature

really warrants her inclusion here. But for the most part I simply want to close by reiterating my admiration for Upton's remarkable accomplishment: her good sense, her thoroughness, her shrewd readings, and, not least, the clarity and precision of her prose. She reminds us how useful criticism can be, how gracefully it can perform its function, and how rarely it rises to the challenge of a successful account of the art of our own time and place.

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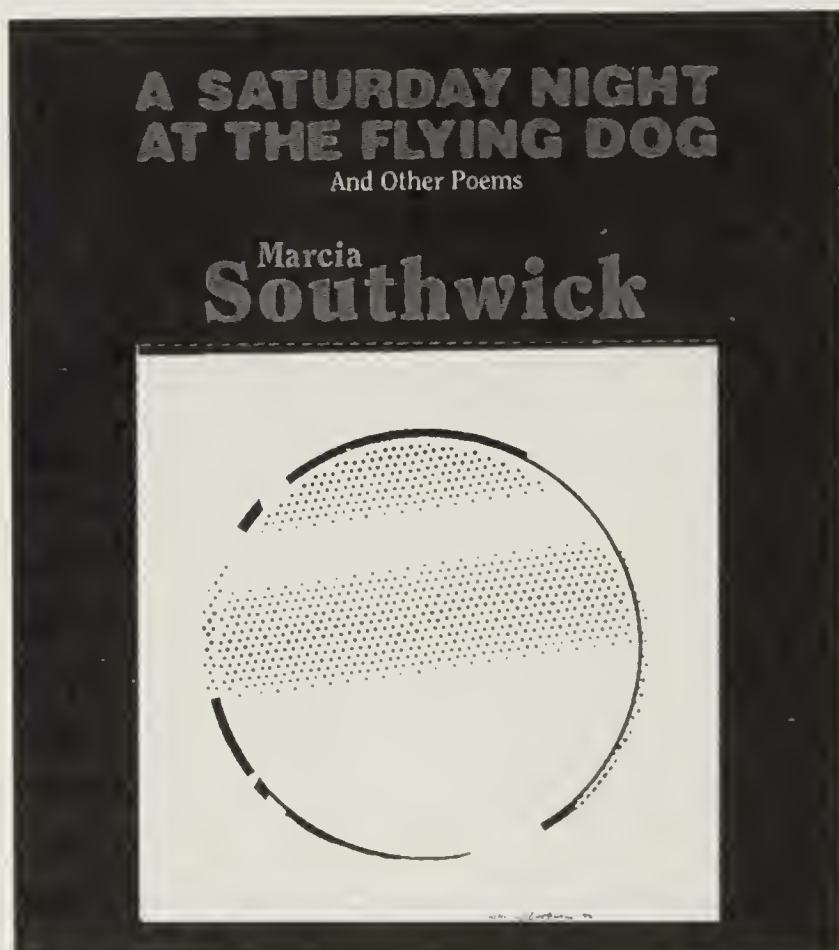
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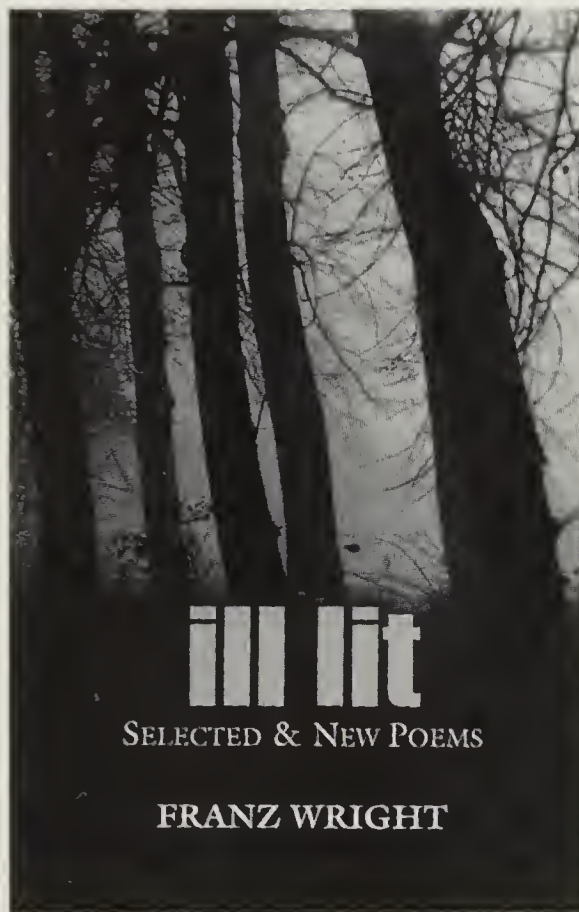


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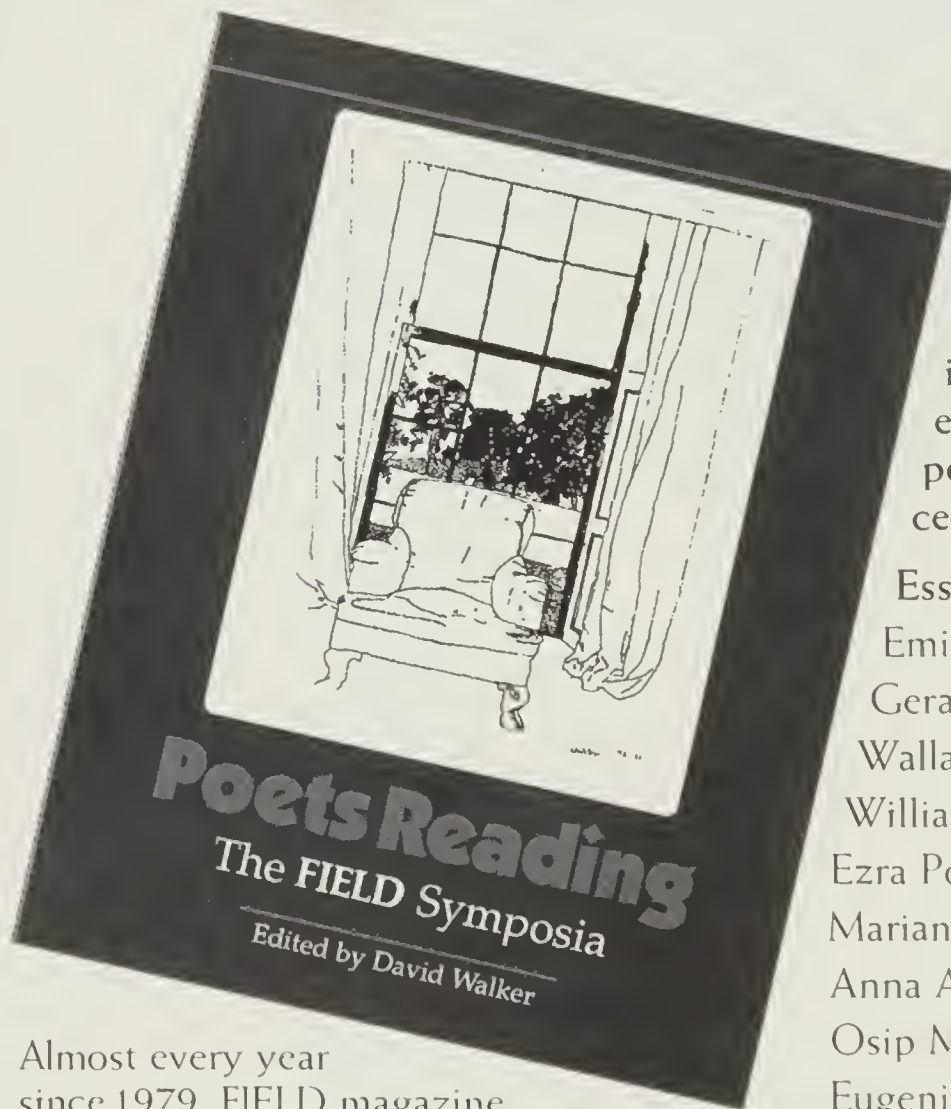
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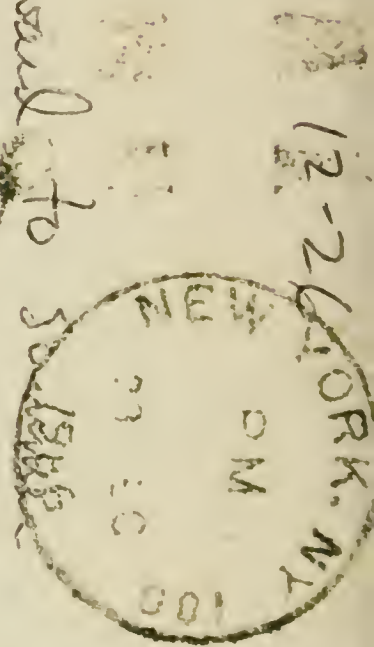


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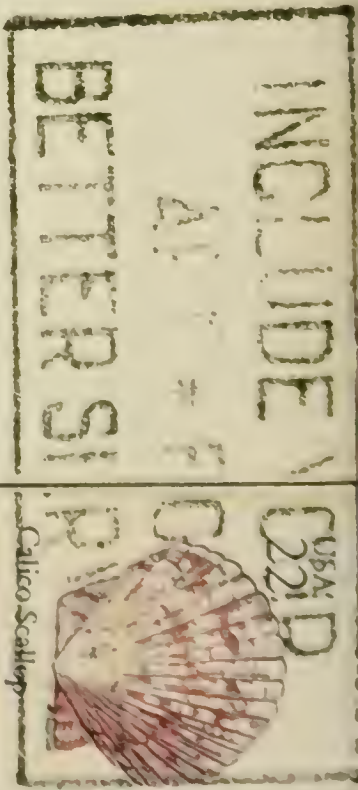
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